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ABSTRACT

Innovative programs of school reform and research for diverse student populations have tended to focus on specific cultural, linguistic, or ethnic populations and on specific local communities. Findings from this body of research over the years have resulted in a core of principles for designing and implementing programs for at-risk students. Five generic principles for helping all students achieve excellence in education include: (1) facilitating learning through joint productive activity among teachers and students; (2) developing students' competence in the language and literacy of instruction throughout all instructional activities; (3) contextualizing teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of home and community; (4) challenging students toward cognitive complexity; and (5) engaging students through dialogue, especially the instructional conversation. Once these principles have been enacted and tested, it will be possible to see how they work internally, refine their statements, and determine their limitations. The principles are intentionally generic, and there are likely situations and individuals for whom they should be modified. (Contains 9 references.) (MSE)

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Digest

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From At-Risk to Excellence: Principles for Practice

Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE)

Innovative programs of school reform and research for diverse students have tended to concentrate on specific cultural, linguistic, or ethnic populations and on specific local communities. Research has been conducted on a variety of at-risk populations, including Native Americans; Korean, Chinese, and Southeast Asian Americans; Haitian Americans; Native Hawaiians; economically disadvantaged and geographically isolated European Americans; rural and inner city African Americans; and Latinos of many national origins. Continued energy has also been devoted to the study and development of model school programs for a variety of mixed racial, linguistic, and cultural groups.

For many years, researchers have attempted to integrate studies of these groups into literature reviews encompassing thousands of studies conducted worldwide. These reviews have uncovered a core list of "generic" findings that transcend specific groups, localities, and risk factors (see, e.g., Collier, 1995).

There is broad enough consensus to make these findings, or *principles*, an organizing structure, both for continuing research and for immediate implementation into programs for at-risk children. These principles provide the basis for research being conducted by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE). CREDE studies focus on the principles by studying their enactment in a variety of settings. CREDE's mission is to help the nation's population of diverse students, including those at risk of educational failure, to achieve high standards. CREDE's research operates under six strands: (1) language learning; (2) professional development; (3) family, peers, school, and community; (4) instruction in context; (5) integrated school reform; and (6) assessment.

The Five Generic Principles

Principle 1: Facilitate learning through joint productive activity among teachers and students.

Learning takes place best through joint productive activity—when experts and novices work together for a common product or goal, and during the activity have opportunities to converse about it (Rogoff, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In the natural (nonformal) settings of family, community, and workplace, shared ways of understanding the world are created through the development of language systems and word meanings during joint activity. Young children and mature adults alike develop their competencies in the context of such activity. In many schools, however, opportunities for this kind of shared experience are rare, which in turn limits students' opportunities to develop common systems of understanding with their teachers and with their peers.

Work that is carried out collaboratively for a common objective and the discourse that accompanies the process contribute to the highest level of academic achievement; "schooled" or "scientific" ideas are used to solve practical problems presented by the real world. The constant connection of schooled concepts and everyday concepts is basic to the process by which mature schooled thinkers understand the world. Discourse that builds basic schooled competencies can take place only if the teacher shares in these experiences. Joint productive activity between teacher and students helps to create a common context of experience within the school itself, which is especially important when the teacher and the students are not of the same background.

Principle 2: Develop students' competence in the language and literacy of instruction throughout all instructional activities.

Language proficiency—in speaking, reading, and writing—is the road to high academic achievement. Whether in bilingual or monolingual programs, whether instruction is in English, Spanish, Navajo, or Chinese, language development in the language or languages of instruction is the first goal of teaching and learning.

The current literacy movement in cognitive and educational research is revealing how deeply language, cognition, values, and culture are linked. Studies of English as a second language indicate the strong ties between language development and both academic achievement and cognitive growth (Collier, 1995). Because of this relationship, language development should be a metagoal for the entire school day. Language and literacy development should be fostered through meaningful use and purposive conversation between teacher and students, not through drills and decontextualized rules (Berman et al., 1995; Speidel, 1987). Reading and writing must be taught both as specific curricula and within subject matters. The teaching of language expression and comprehension should also be integrated into each content area.

The development of language and literacy as a metagoal also applies to the specialized language genres required for the study of science, mathematics, history, art, and literature. Effective mathematics learning is based on the ability to "speak mathematics," just as the overall ability to achieve across the curriculum is dependent on mastery of the language of instruction.

The ways of using language that prevail in school discourse—such as ways of asking and answering questions, challenging claims, and using representations—are frequently unfamiliar to English language learners and other at-risk students. However, their own culturally based ways of talking can be effectively linked to the language used for academic disciplines by building learning contexts that will evoke children's language strengths.

Principle 3: Contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of home and community.

Research consistently recommends an increase in contextualized instruction. Schools typically teach rules, abstractions, and verbal descriptions, and they teach by means of rules, abstractions, and verbal descriptions. Schools need to assist at-risk students by providing experiences that show how rules, abstractions, and verbal descriptions are drawn from and applied to the everyday world.

Three levels of contextualization must be addressed:
(1) At the level of instruction, teachers should try to establish patterns of classroom participation and speech that are drawn from conversational styles of family and community life, yet help students develop the academic style of talk suited for schools.
(2) At the curriculum level, cultural materials and skills are the media by which the goals of literacy, numeracy, and science are

affords students opportunities to apply skills acquired in both home and school contexts.

(3) At the policy level, the school itself is contextualized. Effective school-based learning is a social process that affects and is affected by the entire community. Longer-lasting progress has been achieved with children whose learning has been explored, modified, and shaped in collaboration with their parents and communities (John-Steiner & Osterreich, 1975).

All three levels of contextualization have this common premise: The high literacy goals of schools are best achieved in everyday, culturally meaningful contexts. This contextualization utilizes students' funds of knowledge and skills as a sound foundation for new knowledge. This approach fosters pride and confidence as well as greater school achievement.

Principle 4: Challenge students toward cognitive complexity.

At-risk students, particularly those of limited Standard English proficiency, are often forgiven any academic challenges on the assumption that they are of limited ability; or they are forgiven any genuine assessment of progress, because the assessment tools do not fit. As a result, both standards and feedback are weakened, with the predictable end that achievement is handicapped. While such policies may have originated with benign motives, the effect is to deny many diverse students the basic requirements of progress: high academic standards and meaningful assessment that allows feedback and responsive assistance.

There is a clear consensus among researchers in this field that at-risk students require instruction that is cognitively challenging, that is, instruction that requires thinking and analysis, not only rote, repetitive, detail-level drills. This does not mean ignoring phonics rules or not memorizing the multiplication tables, but it does mean going beyond that level of curriculum into the deep exploration of interesting and meaningful materials. There are many ways in which cognitive complexity has been introduced into the teaching of at-risk students. There is good reason to believe, for instance, that a bilingual curriculum itself provides cognitive challenges that makes it superior to a monolingual approach (Collier, 1995).

Working with a cognitively challenging curriculum requires careful leveling of tasks, so students are stretched to reach within their zones of proximal development, where they can perform with teacher guidance. It does not mean drill-and-kill exercises, and it does not mean overwhelming challenges that discourage effort. Getting the correct balance and providing appropriate assistance is, for the teacher, a truly cognitively challenging task.

Principle 5: Engage students through dialogue, especially the instructional conversation.

Basic thinking skills—the ability to form, express, and exchange ideas in speech and writing—are most effectively developed through dialogue, that is, through the process of questioning and sharing ideas and knowledge. The instructional conversation (IC) is the means by which teachers and students relate formal, schooled knowledge to the student's individual, community, and family knowledge. This concept may appear to be a paradox; instruction implies authority and planning, while conversation implies equality and responsiveness. But the IC is based on assumptions that are fundamentally different from traditional lessons. Teachers who use it, like parents in natural teaching, assume the student has something to say beyond the known answers in the head of the adult. The adult listens carefully, makes guesses about student's intended meaning as needed, and adjusts responses to assist the student's efforts—in other words, engages in conversation (Ochs, 1982). Such conversation reveals the knowledge, skills, and values—the culture—of the learner, and enables the teacher to contextualize teaching to fit the learner's experience base.

In U.S. schools the instructional conversation is rare. More often teaching is through the recitation script, in which the teacher repeatedly assigns and assesses. True dialogic teaching transforms classrooms and schools into "the community of learners" they can become "when teachers reduce the distance between themselves and their students by constructing lessons from common understandings of each others' experience and ideas" and make teaching a "warm, interpersonal and collaborative activity" (Dalton, 1989).

Conclusion

Once these principles have been enacted and tested, it will be possible to see how they work internally, to refine their statements, and to determine their limitations. The principles are intentionally generic; in all likelihood there are situations and individuals for whom they must be modified. The principles are now like "black boxes," and the next stage of research will be to open those boxes to adjust and deepen our understanding and our prescriptions for development.

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